WILLIAM HENRY MILBURN

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American Portrait
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WILLIAM HENRY MILBURN

Wm. H. Milburn, "the blind preacher," was born in Philadelphia, on the 26th of September, 1823. His father, who was a merchant, meeting with reverses in fortune, moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1837. The family was originally from Maryland.

When Mr. Milburn was a lad about five years of age, the unfortunate accident occurred which resulted in his blindness. This cut him off from most boyish sports, and he became absorbed in reading. His passion for learning was early exhibited, and in his new Western home his time was divided between his duties as clerk in his father's little store and his studies. He read, or spelled out, various authors, and became sufficiently acquainted with the Greek and Latin languages to enable him to enter in 1839, the Freshman class of Illinois College, then under the Presidency of Dr. Edward Beecher. All was prosperous until his health suddenly gave way, near the close of his last collegiate year, and he was compelled to relinquish his studies. Led by his religious associations he engaged in the service of the Methodist Church, as an itinerant preacher. Through his early years young Milburn had listened with the deepest interest to the stories told by the travelling Methodist ministers who made his father's house a resort. Under the impression received from these conversations, and the teachings of his parents, he joined the Church when he was fourteen, with the intention of becoming a preacher; and some six years later he entered the service for which he had considered himself destined.

During the summer of 1843, he traversed a region of one thousand miles in extent, preaching on every Saturday and Sunday, and three or four times during the week. On his twentieth birthday he was admitted as a "travelling preacher" to the Illinois Conference. This mode of life had a favorable effect upon his health, and he was enabled to continue on the various Western Circuits for twelve years. In 1846 his marriage took place. The same year he became Chaplain of Congress. In 1847, he went to the South, and labored in Montgom-

ery, Mobile, and elsewhere. After spending about six years in the State of Alabama, he removed to the city of New York, where he became a popular lecturer. He was re-elected chaplain of Congress, and held the office until March, 1855. In 1859 he visited England, in company with Bishop Simpson and the Rev. Dr. McClintock, and delivered lectures in the chief cities to crowded audiences. During that year he published "Ten Years of a Preacher's Life," and in the following year "Pioneers, and the People of the Mississippi Valley."

Mr. Milburn delivered a course of lectures before the Lowell Institute, Boston, entitled, "Sketches of the Early History and Settlement of the Mississippi Valley." Among his other lectures are "Songs in the Night, or the Triumph of Genius over Blindness;" "An Hour's Talk About Women;" "The Southern Man;" "The Rifle, Axe, and Saddle-bags;" "Symbols of Early Western Character and Civilization." These lectures were delivered in all the principal places in the Union. Two of his more recent ones are, "What a Blind Man Saw in Paris," and "What a Blind Man Saw in California." "His nearly total loss of sight, while it excited the sympathy of the public, made no demands upon their indulgence or forbearance. On the contrary, the lectures were always spirited, and enlivened with the fruits of various mental acquisitions, adding one more to the many honorable examples of 'the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties.'"

At one time he was pastor of the Pacific Street Methodist Church in Brooklyn, and afterward at the John Street Church, in New York. He subsequently became an Episcopalian. He was ordained deacon in 1865, and priest in 1866, by Bishop Hopkins of Vermont. In 1871 he returned to the Methodist communion.

"In the pulpit he has an eloquence beyond his words. To think that he is blind, and still able to conduct an entire church service, is to fill the mind with thoughts approaching veneration. Presently his soft, sweet voice recites a hymn, and then a chapter from the Bible. You miss the books, but there is a new fascination in the sacred words spoken from the memory of the eloquent blind man. His sermon is equally impressive. It has all the characteristics of an extempore address, and is, in truth, delivered but slightly from memory. He is not boisterous and declamatory, like most of the Methodist ministers, but proceeds calmly, tenderly, and always eloquently. His effort is to be entirely natural, and to touch the heart rather than to amaze the mind. At times he shows great depth of feeling with his subject, and becomes more animated in his delivery!"

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